



# NEW EPOCH

## TETHYS II: HUNTERS OF THE FREEHOLD

BY GARY ASTLEFORD

### THE PEOPLE

Tethyns are short in stature, but most are well-muscled and intimidating nonetheless. They are of dark of complexion, with hair color ranging from black to light brown, and eyes that range from blue to gray. The bodies of Tethyn males tend to be hairy, and they grow thick beards as a sign of virility and strength. Men braid their beards, while women and men alike grow their hair long and keep it braided, often slathering it in a gel of animal lard as an alternative to having to wash it.

Dress in Tethys depends on the occasion. When mustering for a hunt, Tethyns wear undyed leathers and cover themselves with dirt, mud, and foliage so that they blend in with their surroundings. High boots with soft leather soles allow them to move with uncanny stealth, even in the most overgrown forests. When in their strongholds and halls, they are prone to wearing bright colors. Clothing made from leather so thin as to be translucent, which is then dyed in bright hues, is a staple of Tethyn fashion.

Tethyns are a boisterous folk, as quick to laughter as they are to anger. They are insulted easily, especially by those that they consider weak, or who have not rightly earned their superiority. Any boast, perceived insult, or imagined wrongdoing is cause enough to initiate a hunt led by the two opposing parties. In a manner, young hunters are therefore subconsciously encouraged by their peers to be braggarts, boasters, ruffians and bullies; the more tension and argument between hunters, the more hunts there will be, and therefore the more food and supplies for the freehold.

This culture of intimidation and strong personalities carries over into Tethyns' dealings with outsiders; this, combined with an overwhelming suspicion for those who do not follow the way of the hunt, leads to often violent encounters with other cultures. The deeper into the Tethyn wilds one gets, the less friendly the native people seem to be. Freeholders take an almost sadistic pleasure in testing strangers for weakness, but they will do anything for a friend, foreign-born or not, once he has proven his quality.

### COMMERCE

There is no official commerce or trade between freeholds, as each is expected to acquire all of its food and supplies through its hunts. However, just as gifts allow for the dissemination necessities within a freehold, so do they allow for the transport of items from one region of


Tethyn land to another. The major hunts always involve guest hunters from other freeholds, and any hunter thus invited is expected to bring a gift; the more exotic the gift, the more praised the hunter is during the ceremonies before the hunt. In this way the bones or skins of an animal might end up in a freehold hundreds of miles from its natural range.

### FOREIGN LANDS

There is virtually no peaceful commerce or interaction between Tethyns and other cultures. First of all, any who approach Tethyn land without permission are suspected of poaching, the most vile of crimes in Tethys and punishable by death. Also, whereas in Tethyn culture the blustering and threats of a virile young hunter would simply lead to a hunt, when the same mannerisms are used with outsiders it tends to lead to the drawing of weapons. The Tethyn freeholds that border other cultures or are near major waterways or coasts, therefore, tend to constantly feud with their neighbors. Constant violence and war among men is not seen as healthy, however, so these peripheral freeholds are somewhat ostracized from Tethyn culture as a whole. If a Tethyn breaks a minor infraction, he is sent to one of the peripheral freeholds for a variable number of years, depending on his infraction. If he is unwilling to shed the blood of other men, he will likely die. If he is willing to shed the blood of other men, on the other hand, then he will be marked as a pariah upon his return to his old freehold. Most criminals therefore return to the border freeholds, there to live a life that, though violent and short, is at least one in which there can be honor among one's fellows. The only commerce that Tethys truly has to offer outsiders is that of blood for blood.

This tendency led in part to the Tethyns' downfall. With each new culture that assailed them, the Tethyn way of life was chipped away and their confidence in their way of life eroded. The first was, of course, the Atlanteans; while their First Exodus was a peaceful venture, the Tethyns perceived them as nothing more than poachers and outsiders who should be frightened off. What they couldn't imagine was that, after the first ship or two was burned and its inhabitants chased into the wilds to die, dozens more would come. With their sturdier steel weapons and armor, the longer range of their bows, and of course their powerful magic, the Atlanteans easily repaid the border freeholds for their violent welcome . . . and then, in an ultimate insult that the Tethyns would never realize, they passed them by.





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Despite the Atlanteans' desire to expand their culture and influence and help others' grow and improve themselves, they simply could not stomach the Tethyns' violent, blustery nature. They found them to be savages, not just in habit and technology, but in mindset as well.

Their brief foray into Tethyn land had an impact, however. When the outlying coastal freeholds were destroyed, the desperate (and violent) hunters there fled inland, for the first time returning en masse instead of singly to the central freeholds. While they wouldn't imagine defying the Tethyn way or attempting violent takeovers of established freeholds, they nonetheless were able to create cells of comradery within the freeholds. Whereas before they were merely singly pariahs ostracized by the whole, now they were bands and clusters of disenfranchised men, looked down upon but also feared by the other freeholders. These bands of violent men were sometimes chased from freeholds, or left of their own accord to find places more accommodating to them, or at time even overwhelmed the local culture and absorbed it into their own violent way of life. With a few battles, the Atlantean exodus unknowingly destroyed in three decades what had existed for over 3,000 years.

The situation worsened with the coming of the Kurgans. By now the Tethyn culture had in many places been reduced to feuding clans. The land in many places went unhunted, and it became easier to take from others than to hunt for oneself. Women were forced into subservience in many freeholds, and those who could not fight had to steal. Whereas before the plains beasts had been unhunted because they were too easy prey, now they were seen simply as an easy source of food. When the Kurgans began to arrive, they found not a strong and well-entrenched society that they might otherwise have left alone, but a weak and feuding network of bands whose weapons and armor were inferior, and who had no horses on which to fight. The Kurgan newcomers easily destroyed them, taking their women and children and putting the men, who were deemed to violent and proud to absorb, to death.

By the end of the mythic age, the last remnants of Tethyn culture had receded to the barren mountain peaks of what would be the Pyrenees, as well as to the coastline where they survived via a subsistence fishing lifestyle. The largest groups of surviving Tethyns left their home entirely, migrating to northwestern Ofir and huddling in the shadow of Keheb on the shores of the Inner Sea.

### MAGIC & TECHNOLOGY

Magic is feared in Tethys. By and large, the people of this land are a superstitious folk who avoid any connection to the occult. Few Tethyns show any aptitude towards magic, and those who do are shunned or otherwise encouraged not to make use of their talents. The only variety of magic that is routinely employed in Tethys is a kind of witchcraft that is referred to as Eogh.

The art of Eogh is often employed by ancient men and women who live as hermits, well removed from the rest of society lest they be lynched or harassed. In most circumstances, these Tethyn witches are left alone, unless their skills as healers, seers, and sages are required. Practitioners call on the spirits of the land for favors, which are paid for, one way or another, by whoever is requesting the service.

The arts of medicine, engineering, science, and agriculture that are routinely used in Tethys are primitive by the standards of Atlantis. The only true technological genius they demonstrate is in their creative and complete use of the animal products from their hunts.